



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE PROSAIC SIDE OF NIGHT DUTY

By EDITH J. BURNS

New York City

Several months before I entered the hospital, I came across a verse entitled "Woman's Rights," which interested me.

The right to tread so softly beside the couch of pain,
To soothe with gentle fingers the tangled locks again,
To watch beside the dying in the still, small hours of night
And breathe a consecrating prayer as the spirit takes its flight.

"How very beautiful," I thought, as I read the lines over and over again until I knew them by heart, and my desire was quickened to be admitted to the hospital and to put into practice these dearest rights of my sex.

Being now a nurse in a hospital and at present on night duty, I have at last abundant opportunity to enjoy the special privileges so poetically enumerated. Enjoy, did I say? That hardly seems the right word. I have an astonishing number of duties to perform, duties that take precedence over those tasks assigned to the nurse by the average writer of romance.

"The right to tread softly beside the couch of pain" sounds rather well, but as particularly exercised, it demands an abundance of strength, both of body and mind, and means no little self-sacrifice. When one is hurrying around a hospital ward, trying to attend to twenty other less romantic, but decidedly more necessary, duties, she is apt to overlook those employments so popular among nurses one meets in print. The nurse who allowed her patient to become the possessor of "tangled locks" would be sternly called upon to give a good reason for her neglect, and should the good reason not be forthcoming, she would be treated to comments by her head nurse, intended to prevent a similar occurrence in future.

"To watch beside the dying in the still small hours of night,"—no poetry this, but an experience that is bound to leave its mark on the life of the frivolous young person, a solemn tragic experience that calls for all her latent powers of self-control and the steadiest nerves she can command. Very grave are the thoughts that bear her company during the long hard hours of night duty when, perhaps for the first time, she is brought face to face with the great problem of life or death. When she sits beside a death bed, she craves words of hope and promise

for a future life. This hospital nursing brings experience of pain, suffering and sorrow to the young nurse, but death, awful enough at any time, is painfully solemn at night when the only sound that reaches the ears is the heavy, spasmodic breathing of the patient. Little wonder that she feels lonely, for hers is a world of sickness and pain, yet through it all she watches with dog-like faithfulness, ever hopeful for the patient's recovery. At the last, when she is alone with the dead, she feels cut off from the world of health and happiness. Such is night duty in a hospital.

The difficulties of night duty exceed any conception a nurse may have formed of it. Night duty means turning night into day and day into night. It means sleeping in the day time, provided one can, after the harrowing scenes of the previous night. But no matter how little sleep she may have obtained during her hours of rest, her night hours must be wakeful and she must be at work through the whole night.

As a rule she gets up feeling tired, sleepy, stupid, and apart from the rest of the world. Her duties call her to the wards at 7 p.m. and she will take entire charge of perhaps thirty patients. When 7 o'clock the next morning arrives, she thankfully drags her tired and sleepy body to the nurses' home, there to partake of a solitary breakfast while her thoughts persistently linger around the beds she has just left. Her breakfast over, she finds herself wide-awake and yet she must sleep. She hies herself to her room, stifling all yearnings to be about in the air and sunshine and, drawing tight the shades and shutters, creeps into bed resolutely, to close her eyes in needed sleep. In this she is usually successful at about the time for her to get up again. Her failure to sleep when she ought, combined with a tendency to sleep when she ought not, means much misery for the nerves of the night nurse. Then again, even though she may have slept well during the day, the night nurse cannot feel comfortably sure that she will not be tortured by an overpowering drowsiness stealing over her when she least desires it.

The work so lavishly provided for the night nurse in our hospitals has at least the one advantage of tending to keep her so busy that she must of necessity keep awake. There comes a temporary lull, perhaps between 3 and 4 in the morning, when all about her are wrapped in slumber, but she must be ever wakeful and her ears alert for the first sounds of the call of her patients. Yet there are times when these restless, moaning, pain-racked hospital wards are quiet in sleep. She is thankful for the duties that keep her moving about and performs them so energetically that the dreaded enemy of sleep is held at bay for the

time being at least. When the lull comes, she might sink into a chair, welcoming the opportunity for a few moments' needed rest, but the battle against sleep is so severe as to deprive her of this.

Even when softly pressing her finger tips to the clammy, emaciated wrist of a patient, noting the fluttering irregular heart beats, or when noting the character of the respiration, the night nurse is always battling against the desire to close her eyes, for her insidious foe, sleep, creeps over her at the slightest inclination; her eyes are heavy, her senses numb and only by a superhuman effort does she keep herself awake for the stern duties before her. Sometimes when she sits down to rest for a moment, her limbs feel paralyzed and her eye-lids loaded with lead. Then she realizes that she is falling asleep on duty and by a powerful exercise of will, stimulated by fright, she drags herself to the ice water supply and vigorously applies some to her face. She drinks cold milk and paces the corridor to help her in her fight, but even so, her head nods as she walks. Often she welcomes the work caused by a restless patient as something to occupy her mind. Sometimes she paces the ward, peering over the row of cots and coming dangerously near annoying the patients in their needed sleep. But in her torture of keeping awake, their ills seem almost trivial. To the nurse at this time, the bare floor would offer welcome repose.

This is night duty, and it is little wonder that as the weeks of hard work, poor sleep and heavy responsibilities pass, the night nurse grows nervous and melancholy. Little wonder that as she treads the silent halls she is startled by her own shadow and although her ears are constantly on the alert for sounds from her ward, her heart jumps and her limbs tremble when the silence is broken.

When the day breaks and the first streaks of dawn tint the horizon, she welcomes the joys of morning at last and quickly the terrors and loneliness of the night hours are dispelled. When seven o'clock arrives, she can scarcely believe it is so late. The day nurse comes and she tells her of her hard night, but the only consolation she receives is the assurance that perhaps it was hard, but that it is nothing to the time *she* puts in. Such a reply may bring its sting, but the resentment felt by the night nurse is short-lived and she forgives it quickly. A remembrance of one's individual task, only, is characteristic of the work in our hospitals.